

Article

Commemoration of the Dead in the Context of Alternative Spirituality: Collective and Solitary Rituals

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Abstract: The ritualised commemoration of the deceased belongs to the most common forms of communication with the dead. The meaning that people ascribe to a religious commemoration ritual is determined by a concrete religious doctrine, although it can be influenced by a broader cultural tradition. However, in the context of alternative spiritual currents, there can be many possible interpretations of communication with the dead, as there is no “official” doctrine supported by established institutions. In addition, alternative spirituality is marked by the emphasis on individuality, which results in the predominance of solitary practice. Yet, in various contexts, the tension between individuality and community can be manifested in different forms of ritualised behaviour, ranging from strictly private performances to prescribed group rituals. The paper addresses different levels of individual and collective practice in the context of alternative spirituality in Slovakia, a post-socialist country with a predominantly Christian, mostly Catholic, population. It makes use of the theoretical tools of Mary Douglas’ theory relating to the connection between cosmological beliefs and particular forms of social life. Rituals and ritualised behaviour are considered in the case of the triduum of All Saints’ Eve, All Saints’ Day, and All Souls’ Day. The results of ethnographic research on spiritual circles operating in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, have shown that these holidays are perceived and practiced differently by people with different religious or spiritual affiliation. The individual interpretation and the degree of associated ritualised behaviour depend on personal background, as well as the social organisation of a circle to which a practitioner belongs.



Citation: Bužeková, Tatiana. 2024. Commemoration of the Dead in the Context of Alternative Spirituality: Collective and Solitary Rituals. *Religions* 15: 626. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15050626>

Academic Editors: Mirjam Mencej and Éva Pócs

Received: 31 March 2024

Revised: 13 May 2024

Accepted: 14 May 2024

Published: 20 May 2024



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Keywords: alternative spirituality; Slovakia; commemoration rituals; collective and solitary rituals; cultural theory; Wicca; neo-shamanism

1. Introduction

The commemoration of the deceased belongs to the most common forms of communication with the dead. The corresponding ritualised behaviour reflects culturally specific worldviews that influence individuals’ understanding and actions. In a religious context, the meaning ascribed to a commemoration ritual is determined by a concrete religious doctrine, although it can be influenced by a broader cultural tradition. However, contemporary religious scenes in a globalised world include life philosophies and spiritual currents that may draw on different traditions and involve multiple innovations. The increasing interest in such trends presenting an alternative to established religions has been explored by scholars from various fields of study (i.e., [Hanegraaff 1996](#); [Heelas 1996](#); [Heelas et al. 2005](#); [Sutcliffe and Bowman 2000](#); [Partridge 2004–2005](#)). It has been noted that, despite their diversity, they share a common idea of inner dimension, which places emphasis on mental processes and emotions, as experienced by practitioners ([Bloch 1998](#); [Houtman and Aupers 2010](#), pp. 6–7). The central place of self and individuality in alternative spirituality is linked to solitary practice as a hallmark of many spiritual trends. Yet, in various contexts, the tension between individuality and community can result in different forms of ritualised behaviour, ranging from strictly private practices to prescribed group rituals. Individual and collective performance may be combined—one can practice privately without participating in group events; however, solitary practitioners are often engaged in

collective activities (Berger 2019; Bloch 1998; Hammer 2010). Social scientists have long noted that rituals foster group solidarity; the question is as follows: what is the relative role of collective and solitary rituals in maintaining the solidarity of alternative spiritual communities? This question is also important in relation to the communication with the deceased, because, in religious and spiritual contexts, they are typically represented as part of a broader community uniting the living and the dead, as agencies that have impact on the life of the living.

In my paper, I will discuss different levels of individual and collective practice in the context of alternative spirituality in Slovakia, a post-socialist country with a predominantly Christian, mostly Catholic, population. I will make use of the theoretical tools of Mary Douglas' Cultural Theory relating to the connection between cosmological beliefs and particular forms of social life (Douglas [1966] 1984, [1970] 2002). I argue that her ideas about the forms of social organisation and disorganisation shaping cultural worldviews through ritual can be applied in the context of alternative spirituality. I will present the results of ethnographic research in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia, and will illustrate my argument through the analysis of worldviews expressed by several people who are engaged in spiritual practice.

I will particularly address rituals and ritualised behaviour associated with the triduum of All Saints' Eve (31 October), All Saints' Day (1 November), and All Souls' Day (2 November). In Slovakia, these days are traditionally called "Dušičky" (Little Souls) and are celebrated in accordance with Catholic tradition, although this practice can be combined with folk customs related to ancestors and the Otherworld. During recent decades, All Saints' Eve has been linked to Halloween as a secular, yet strongly associated with the supernatural, holiday; its celebration has been accompanied by various kinds of ritualised behaviour (Popelková and Zajonc 2022). Halloween is commonly believed to have roots in the pagan Celtic festival of Samhain and, therefore, in the context of alternative spirituality, has been linked to various beliefs associated with the Otherworld (Power 2011). My aim is to explore different practices connected to Dušičky, Halloween, and Samhain and interpret individuals' experiences in relation to their background and worldviews.

2. Self-Spirituality and Rituals

Most spiritual currents present a certain alternative to established religious faith—they "invariably understand themselves to be 'alternative', either strongly (explicitly dissenting) or weakly (they are merely variant or optional)" (Sutcliffe and Bowman 2000, p. 2). Many scholars, therefore, agree that there exists an implicit normative opposition of institutional religion versus subjective spirituality. This view has been reflected in sociological studies based on secularisation theories that explain the popularity of alternative spirituality through religious decline and the commercialisation of society. They have been significantly influenced by Thomas Luckmann's analysis of New Age movement (Luckmann 1967, 1996). He argued that structural differentiation in modern society resulted in the erosion of the Christian monopoly and the "privatisation" of religion—the process in which people could construct personal packages of meaning based on individual tastes and preferences, which played no public role. Following Luckmann, many scholars supported the idea of the social insignificance of a "spiritual supermarket" (Lyon 2000) or "pick-and-mix religion", in which individuals produce "their own individual and personal combination of elements which they can change to suit and as they themselves change and develop" (Hamilton 2000, p. 192).

However, as Paul Heelas (1996, p. 23) has noticed, the diverse spiritual trends place emphasis on mental processes and emotions: the basic idea is that "what lies within—experienced by way of 'intuition', 'alignment' or an 'inner voice'—serves to inform the judgments, decisions and choices required for everyday life". This inner dimension is part of a shared "doctrine of self-spirituality"—the idea of personal development that "constitutes the common denominator of the wide range of beliefs, rituals, and practices found in the contemporary spiritual milieu" (Houtman and Aupers 2010, pp. 6–7). Self-

spirituality is supposed to contribute to the general transformation of the world, because the development of self is perceived as work on both an individual and a global level. In this context, personal “packages of meaning” can be interpreted as corresponding to the basic values of Western democracy—freedom, individualism, and equality—as most spiritual currents emphasise “the right of each individual to seek for himself or herself what to practice and believe” (Bloch 1998, p. 287). As such, they can be considered as a hallmark of modernity or postmodernity (Heelas 1996).

The mentioned opposition of spirituality and religion demands “special attention to the process of religious belief, the verbal, behavioral, and material expressions of religious belief, and the ultimate object of religious belief” (Primiano 1995, p. 44). As Marion Bowman notices, it is important to understand “the minutiae of how people live their religion in particular contexts, their interaction with material culture, their often flexible attitude to and use of tradition, their frequently complex relationship and negotiations with institutional forms of religiosity, and above all their agency” (Bowman 2022, p. 8). Belonging to a hierarchical religion may be rejected, because it presupposes the submission of inner wisdom to outer authority (Houtman and Aupers 2010, p. 8). Notably, the last census in Slovakia showed that the number of people belonging to the large churches has fallen and the number of non-religious people has risen significantly (Statistical Office of the Slovak Republic 2021). This change does not necessarily point to the increase in non-believers, but can indicate the growing popularity of “unchurched spiritualities” (Watts 2022) and can be linked to a growing percentage of people in the world who identify as spiritual, but not religious (SBNR, see Fuller 2001; Wixwat and Saucier 2021).

Individualism, as a feature of most alternative currents, does not mean that collective practice is absent; on the contrary, collective dimension gains importance due to the holistic representation of the universe, as well as shared values of freedom of choice and inner dimension (Heelas et al. 2005). I believe that making general conclusions about the privacy of alternative spirituality as a whole is erroneous, due to the diversity of spiritual practices. Some of them may result in the creation of relatively organised religious groups, while others exist mostly on an individual level and, furthermore, practitioners may combine solitary and collective rituals. Thus, it is more useful to look at this phenomenon through the prism of social ties between participants of rituals. Mary Douglas [1966] 1984, [1970] 2002) Cultural Theory, viewing culture as a system of symbolic classifications, can provide a useful insight into the relation between ritualised behaviour and social life.

Douglas argued that any society determines the assignment of things to their right place—the culturally specific moral order. This system of symbolic classifications depends on forms of social organisation that shape specific “thought styles”, in which people organise things, remember them, or feel. The moral dimension becomes apparent when things get out of place—any violation of the symbolic order is perceived as pollution. Douglas links the idea of uncleanness or dirt with ritualised behaviour, because, in such situations, people are mobilised to renew and reinforce ritually the symbolic structure and the social order—ritual is “an attempt to create and maintain a particular culture, a particular set of assumptions by which experience is controlled” (Douglas [1966] 1984, p. 129). By ritual, Douglas did not mean only formal public ceremonies; rather, she pointed out the importance of people’s daily activities, such as cleaning or praying, which maintain and reinforce order in an individual’s life. For her, ritual “is pre-eminently form of communication” (Douglas [1970] 2002, p. 20), a symbolic language that mediates collective representations and, therefore, determines the internalisation of social order. In this process, forms of social organisation are important—social control works at different levels and ritual, as an instrument coercing people to obey social rules, works differently in different social contexts.

I believe that Douglas’ ideas about rituals can be applied in the context of alternative spirituality in modern societies. She viewed humanity as one species subject to the same basic constraints, as the mechanisms of classification work in any setting, albeit differently in different kinds of communities. She pointed out that, unlike primitive rituals

holding together in a relatively unified way, modern cultures are characterised by a disparate and disconnected set of rituals; but this difference is not an outcome of scientific and technological development. Unlike scholars who saw secularisation as a hallmark of modernity linked to the growth of cities, the prestige of science, or the breakdown of social forms, she claimed that secularisation is “an age-old cosmological type, a product of a definable social experience, which need have nothing to do with urban life or modern science” (Douglas [1970] 2002, p. ix). However, in modern complex societies, the fragmentation of people’s experience results in the fragmentation of rituals that, instead of one single, symbolically consistent universe, creates “a lot of little sub-worlds, unrelated” (Douglas [1966] 1984, p. 68).

In regard to cosmological types, Douglas elaborated Durkheim’s argument about the two dimensions of institutional variation in social organisation—social regulation and social integration. She called these dimensions “grid” (“rules which relate one person to others on an ego-centred basis”) and “group” (“the experience of a bounded social unit”) (Douglas [1970] 2002, p. viii). Grid and group analysis is a method which can be used at different levels—describing and classifying cultures and societies, aspects of culture or society, individual social situations, individual actions, or even individual preferences. It has been employed by social scientists in different socio-cultural contexts (i.e., Douglas 1982), as well as having been criticised (i.e., Boholm 1996; Spickard 1989). My aim, however, is not to carefully apply the grid and group method, although my research on spiritual groups suggests that they could be classified in accordance with these dimensions. Rather, I would pay attention to variations of what Douglas called “social experience”, that is, the group dimension. As Alan Barnard observes, “Douglas’ interest lies in determining and accounting for the relative presence or absence of high grid and high group features, rather than the establishment of precise coordinates along the axes” (Barnard 2004, p. 153). My aim is to calibrate the “relative presence or absence” of group features in the context of selected spiritual circles.

Douglas formulated the following hypothesis:

“The better defined and the more significant the social boundaries, the more bias I would expect in favour of ritual. If the social groups are weakly structured and their membership weak and fluctuating, then I would expect low value to be set on symbolic performance. Along this line of ritual variation appropriate doctrinal differences would appear. With weak social boundaries and weak ritualism, I would expect doctrinal emphasis on internal, emotional states (Douglas [1970] 2002, p. 14)”.

As it was indicated above, spiritual groups are “weakly structured and their membership weak and fluctuating”. Douglas’ prediction about worldviews works—there is indeed “doctrinal emphasis on internal, emotional states” because the idea of self-spirituality highlights the inner dimension, including emotions. On the other side, her hypothesis about “low value to be set on symbolic performance” works for alternative spirituality, only if “symbolic performance” means “collective symbolic performance”, without reference to solitary rituals (belonging to the most important features of alternative currents).

However, even if we are talking about collective symbolic performance, its value in various spiritual circles can vary. According to Douglas, ritualism depends on “the experience of a bounded social unit” (Douglas [1970] 2002, p. viii). If groups are structured differently, with different boundaries and strengths of membership, the value to be set on collective performance can also be different. Below, I will illustrate this argument through the results of my current ethnographic research on spiritual milieu carried out in Bratislava, the capital of Slovakia.

I will also take into account the vital aspect of Douglas’ argument about the adoption of worldviews as a process which she discusses in both *Purity and Danger* (Douglas [1966] 1984, p. 37) and *Natural Symbols* (Douglas [1970] 2002, p. 79). Alternative spiritual beliefs and practices in Slovakia became popular after the fall of communism in the 1990s; before this political change, they played a marginal role in religious life. Spiritual seekers who adopted

them were raised either in Christian tradition or in a secular milieu without significant influence of religion. Because the internalisation of a worldview during childhood differs from learning in later periods (Nelson 2003), the change of political regime would be reflected in the development of religious and spiritual worldviews. I will illustrate this point using people's representations of ritualised behaviour accompanying the traditional commemoration of the dead on Dušičky (the triduum of All Saints' Eve, All Saints' Day, and All Souls' Day), as well as on Halloween and Samhain, which are tied to the same days, but were absent in public discourse in Slovakia before the 1990s.

3. Rituals and “Thought Styles”

3.1. Dušičky, Halloween, and Samhain in Slovakia

The Slovak term “Dušičky” (Little Souls), in a narrow sense, refers to a day which is a state holiday, officially called “Pamiatka zosnulých” (Remembrance of the Dead)—All Souls' Day (2 November), in the Roman Catholic Church dedicated to the memory of the dead. Since the 13th century, it has been celebrated in memory of the souls in Purgatory. Masses and communal prayers for the dead, held on this day, were considered particularly effective regarding the souls' relief. Thus, attending church on All Souls' Day is obligatory for Catholic believers in Slovakia. However, in a broader sense, the term “Dušičky” means not only the All Souls' Day, but also includes All Saints' Eve (31 October) and All Saints' Day (1 November). On these three days, people used to clean cemeteries, tidy up graves, and decorate them using evergreen plants and flowers, sometimes using willow saplings consecrated during Easter week; candles are lit on the graves as a symbol of the eternal light that shines on the souls of the faithful. These activities are customary not only for Catholics, but also for members of other Christian denominations, as well as non-believers.

In the past, people also observed folk customs, such as offering poor people and beggars food or money and asking for their prayers. Some customs have been interpreted by ethnologists as remnants of pre-Christian beliefs associated with a Slavic cult of ancestors, in particular those involving food. For instance, people used to make special cakes called “bones”, “souls”, or “soul bread”, which were also given to the poor and beggars. In many localities, people left part of their dinner on the table overnight from 1 to 2 November; they added bread and butter, and the wealthier ones also left alcohol for the “souls”. The tradition was that if the dead found nothing on the table on this night, they would weep with hunger for a whole year (Chorváthová 1980; Horváthová 1986, p. 243).

The celebration of Halloween, associated with All Saints' Eve (31 October), spread in Europe at the end of the 20th century. It was influenced by local economic and religious conditions and there was a significant difference between countries divided by the Iron Curtain. As Popelková and Zajonc (2022, p. 23) notice, “isolation from information and limited mobility of the population of the former socialist Eastern Europe until the turn of the 1980s and 1990s caused that their adoption and integration into the holiday culture was different compared to Western European countries”. In Slovakia, this holiday has been confronted with domestic traditions, which resulted in mutual influence and overlapping. Empirical research has shown that, today, Halloween is perceived as a secular holiday and a source of entertainment, as well as a religious anti-holiday connected by the Christian church to the worship of Satan (Popelková and Zajonc 2022, pp. 28–29; Popelková 2017, p. 182; Zajonc 2014).

Halloween has been interpreted by scholars as a transformed Celtic festival of Samhain, associated with the dead and the Otherworld, marking the beginning of the Celtic new year. As Ronald Hutton (2024, p. 69) states, at the beginning of the twenty-first century “it was an established orthodoxy among respected scholars who published popular books on ‘the pagan Celts’ that they had celebrated the opening of each new year on the date which was 1 November in the Roman calendar, later the Christian feast of All Saints. Its morrow became another great ecclesiastical festival, of All Souls, and its eve the popular one of Hallowe'en”. Regardless of the scientific credibility of this interpretation, it is important that it became part of a broader image of Celtic spirituality that constitutes a vital part of

many spiritual currents (Power 2011). Celtic spiritual heritage is particularly significant for Wicca, a religious movement that was developed in the UK in the 1950s and has operated within a predominantly western cultural framework, with many local versions adhering to different worldviews. In general, it is characterised by strong ritualism, the worship of nature, magical practices, and polytheism (Luhmann 1989; Pearson 2002).

Obviously, Dušičky, Halloween, and Samhain could be perceived and practiced differently by people with different religious or spiritual backgrounds. Below, I will describe the spiritual circles that I chose to illustrate these differences.

3.2. Field Research: Urban Shamanism and Modern Witchcraft

Since the change of the political regime, spiritual milieu in Slovakia has been influenced by various currents. In public spaces, many spiritual circles are invisible, while some of them became discernible through media. One of the latter is the spiritual trend of neo-shamanism or urban shamanism, which is based on re-interpretations of traditional healing practices coming from various cultures.¹ In Eastern and Central Europe, it gained popularity after the collapse of the Iron Curtain. In post-socialist milieu, however, urban shamanism varies—in countries where traditional shamanic practices belong to local cultural traditions, such as Hungary or Estonia, it is connected to national identity and religious revivalism (Kürti 2015; Parks 2015); in Slavic countries without native shamanic tradition, such as the Czech Republic and Slovakia, neo-shamanic rituals can be characterised by “eclecticism and the acceptance of an infinite number of varieties of spirituality”, which created an individual religiosity (Dyndová 2020, p. 162; Exnerová 2018).

The main role in the formation of neo-shamanic groups in Slovakia in the early 1990s was played by the European branch of the Foundation for Shamanic Studies (hereinafter referred to as the FSS) located in Vienna (Bužeková 2012, 2017).² My research on neo-shamanic circles started in 2009, although I have been in contact with shamans since 2004. Among many aspects of this milieu, I paid attention to rituals and magical practices, which play an essential role in neo-shamanism. In FSS discourse, shamanism is not understood as a religion, but rather as a set of special healing techniques with the central notion of the shaman’s altered state of consciousness. Due to its eclectic nature, these techniques may be borrowed from virtually any cultural tradition. All healing practices are regarded as potentially useful and the common approach is “if a spiritual technique works for one personally, it becomes acceptable” (Znamenski 2007, p. 251).

It is important to notice that many people attending spiritual events know each other and most of them share some basic ideas; the word “shaman” can be used in relation to many practices including alternative healing, magic, and witchcraft. In 2023, I contacted people who identify as witches and refer to Wicca in their practice. It should be said that private rituals associated with Wicca are dispersed and mostly invisible in public spaces, in terms of social organisation.³ However, during the last decade, there emerged a circle in Bratislava that meet on a regular basis on various occasions including public rituals. It was formed around people who are connected to Wiccans in the UK and were consecrated there as priests and priestesses of Wicca. Due to their activities, Wicca entered medial space and became attractive for spiritual seekers, despite hostility on the side of Christian churches.

In my research, I have used standard ethnographic methods—I participated in events organised both by the FSS and Wicca circle and conducted interviews with practitioners. Below, I will consider and compare the worldviews and practice of Robert, a leader of a neo-shamanic circle, and Samuel, a leader of a Wicca circle, with references to other members of both circles.⁴ I will focus on people’s declared worldviews and identify similarities and differences in ritualised behaviour associated with Dušičky, Halloween, and Samhain. In the mentioned circles, these ritual occasions are noteworthy not only in terms of the political change in 1990s and the subsequent change of religious and spiritual scene—they are linked to the notions of the dead, ancestors, and the Otherworld, which are central for both neo-shamanism and Wicca. I will, therefore, consider how my interlocutors describe

their experience related to the communication with the dead during the mentioned triduum, in connection to their background and specific development of spiritual worldviews.

3.3. Shamanic Circle

Robert was born in the 1960s and was raised in a Catholic family. As a child, he attended religious services; however, he emphasised that he was forced to do it, as he did not feel good in church. He was rather interested in science fiction and adventure literature and movies, especially those related to the traditions of the Indians of North America. Since childhood, he considered himself as a “strange” or “weird” person, different from other people, although he did not know why. That “strangeness” became definable after the fall of the communist regime, when he started to read spiritual literature and meet people with similar interests. Even before his first contact with the FSS, he discovered that he was able to heal people using his hands:

“After the change of regime more things were available. And then my wife was ill, so I started doing Reiki. And we went on vacation to Croatia with my friend and his family. His wife got very sick. And he asked me to do something, as she was really bad. So, I slipped my hands, put them on her shoulder and did nothing else. I just asked. . . to help her. She took three swipes and in half an hour she was fine... Later, it came back to me again and again. And then I got an invitation from Karolina [a lecturer of FSS—the author’s note] to a seminar. And since then, I’ve been involved”.

Thus, Robert reflects internalisation and development of his spiritual worldview in connection to the change of political regime. However, for him, it is not only about political discourse; he stresses a negative attitude of Christian authorities and Christian politics towards new forms of spirituality that marked the first decades of the post-socialist era:

“I don’t know if you remember, when Čarnogurský⁵ was in government, there was a proposal to give children a little program in primary schools that would include yoga. So, if they wanted, they could go in this direction. But they threw that off the table and rejected all the spiritual things, including kung fu, karate and all these things that were related to that Asian-Indian mindset. I remember very well how my father came back from church and he had that little leaflet. And it said exactly: “Dear believers, please beware, because satanic demonic forces are waiting for you!” And many things were named, from yoga to tai chi and kung fu. Blah blah blah. About ten things and at the end was shamanism. And I was thinking—that’s it? That’s how much you want to break it down? But we don’t have a conflict with any religion. You can call whoever you want, and your spiritual teacher can be Jesus, can be Mary, can be anybody. They can find you. You can do everything. Nothing is exclusive at all”.

The shamans that I met were very well aware of the typical Christian image of shamanism as a worship of spirits and demons; that made practicing shamanism in a predominantly Christian environment problematic (see Bužeková 2020). Nonetheless, FSS seminars became popular and launched activities of numerous shamanic circles. When I met Robert in 2004, he was already a regular attendant of FSS seminars and events. Later, he cooperated with a leader of the FSS branch in Slovakia and, in time, became an FSS lecturer, actively involved in the organisation. Aside from this, he practices spiritual healing through massages, having many clients.

The three selected holidays are perceived by Robert in accordance with his spiritual development and practice. Dušičky and Halloween do not have a deeper meaning for him, though for different reasons. The celebration of Dušičky was part of his upbringing in a Catholic family, while Halloween was a foreign festival, which he associated with entertaining, commerce, and American culture—fascinating in his youth, but not connected to spirituality or religion. On the other side, as a born Catholic, Robert reflects Dušičky as a

religious holiday. However, for him, this celebration is now just customary, without any religious meaning:

“I don’t remember the church much, but we went to the graves and then we visited family of ours and there we sat by candlelight, and we talked. For me, it is just a custom. I have never searched for its religious meaning. Rather, it is just a tradition. It is about ancestors, about reverence and remembrance, just about piety”.

Samhain is interpreted by Robert differently, in spiritual terms. Importantly, he connects it with the customs associated with Dušičky, broadening the meaning of Christian practices by interpreting them in spiritual terms. He links them to the Slavic goddess of the Underworld—Morena:

“-A gate to the Otherworld is opening then, and those beings, even those that we don’t need here, are able to move around. When the darkness has more power, they can stick to people and work with them. I mean, those demonic forces can also get in and they can work. That is why I always remind my people: when you go to the cemetery, remember that the candle is not just a symbol of you remembering somebody, but it is always about beings. By lighting the candle, you are remembering Morena, and that is an offering to Morena who is guarding those souls there.

-How is Morena related to the Celtic goddess?

-When we look at it in the context of Slavic genesis across Europe... I think that it is just a different image of the goddess in a different religion or in a different culture. Whether it is Anubis or Veles, Morena or Hecate, or whoever. They are always beings that you can find there, and you can communicate with them. They are like sisters and brothers or distant relatives”.

Robert’s interpretation is, therefore, marked by core shamanism, the idea of a common origin of all religions. On the other side, Robert is oriented more towards domestic Slavic traditions, to which shamans in Slovakia have increasingly paid attention in recent years (see [Bužeková 2023](#)). He describes this tendency as follows:

“...the search for Slovak roots, for culture, for customs, for all that was taken away from us and was overwritten by other cultures and which they still want to take away from us, as if it was something else, not our true heritage”.

In terms of social organisation, the circle around Robert functions as other FSS groups do—there is an inner circle of experienced shamans who meet regularly to perform rituals and there are people who attend seminars and events occasionally. People belonging to the inner circle form various relationships and have common obligations, such as organising seminars or managing other events. They express feelings of belonging to this particular shamanic group, when confronted with different attitudes of other spiritually oriented people; but the boundary of this group is rather uncertain, as people can participate in activities of other circles or leave the group entirely. Robert, as a leader, is striving to hold the inner circle together, but, at the same time, he reflects that he cannot control people or force them to participate—that would be a violation of freedom of choice, which is strongly proclaimed in neo-shamanism. As for occasional participants, people who come and go, Robert does not perceive them as members of his group, just as spiritual seekers whom he can help by teaching them shamanic techniques.

Thus, the FSS circle is, indeed, weakly structured and its membership fluctuates. Douglas predicted that the value to be set on symbolic performance would be low in this case, but her prediction does not work entirely. Although collective performance is not that frequent, emphasis is put on solitary practice and individual experience. Robert’s vision of symbolic performance corresponds to the global message of the FSS and the concept of core shamanism, defined as a path to humans’ rightful spiritual heritage—the roots of

spirituality, the universal principles which could be linked to any tradition, in accordance with a shaman's personal choice:

“Personal rituals are performed in accordance with advice of the beings [inhabitants of the Otherworld, the world of spirits and ancestors—the author's note]. It is something that we learn like a cookbook. I say I'll teach you how to cook that soup, just like they taught me. This is the basic recipe, but what you add to it, that is up to you. And if you scratch your ear like this and not like this, that is up to you. If the beings will tell you to do it that way, so do it that way”.

At the same time, Robert stresses that the effectiveness of collective ritual depends on the number of participants. In other words, collective performance works as a sum of individual performances. This interpretation points to the importance of the individual dimension in core shamanism. Furthermore, collective rituals can be performed at distance, without the physical presence of participants. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic people from Robert's circle used to meet online, or just as the time agreed, and the effectiveness of their performance was considered to be the same as if they would have met in a real space.

Douglas' prediction about the emphasis on internal, emotional states in weakly structured groups works for the FSS circle—every ritual is perceived as spiritual work on the self, on one's inner transformation. Robert stresses that Christian rituals for him are opposite to this true practice:

“As a child, I was forced to go to church. Now, in hindsight, I think it was because of bad feelings. Just seeing that these people are playing and in fact they are thinking something completely different... And the anger, and the hatred, and the envy. That is written all over their foreheads. They go there because everybody goes there. And then they get forgiven and confess, they come out and keep doing what they did. But nobody is going to peel off what they have put on themselves. And they forget about it. I don't go there anymore and if I do, I go when it is really important. For example, when my son got married, of course, it was with Mass. He wanted it in the church, so he had it in the church”.

Thus, on the triduum of All Souls' Day, All Saints' Eve, and All Saints' Day, Robert observes traditional collective customs of Dušičky, such as going to a cemetery and lighting candles, which he adopted during his childhood. However, at present, he interprets them in spiritual terms, in accordance with core shamanism, and does not ascribe them special importance. His ritualised behaviour on these days is directed rather to solitary rituals aiming to protect himself and his family from dangerous forces of the Otherworld. The members of Robert's circle behave similarly, although the forms of solitary rituals can significantly differ.

3.4. Wicca Circle

Samuel was born in 1991 in a Catholic family with mixed ethnic background—his mother had German and Hungarian roots, while his father was Gypsy.⁶ Although he did not directly experience the political change, he referred to it through the life and customs of his parents. Describing his childhood, Samuel emphasises that, in his family, magic was practiced on a daily basis:

“My mom was something like a shaman: she mended bones, she healed people, she made fortune-telling. She was very active in this work, and it stayed that way in our family. For us, spirituality was a daily routine. It was kind of folk magic. Some people came to us for card-reading, but mostly my mother used beans, peas, stones, coffee or tea. Some people had health problems, broken bones or things like that. Some couldn't conceive a child. My mom helped them. So, this was my daily routine, and it always went through nature. My mother lived in a very natural way. We did all the planting and everything else”.

Samuel, here, mentioned two things which he later directly connected with the basic components of Wicca—magic and the worship of nature (see below). Another essential spiritual aspect of his childhood was the intensive attention to ancestors paid by family members on his father’s side. There were family altars in households and abundant customs associated with the dead. These rituals became part of today’s practicing and Samuel considers them as an important feature of his circle that is rather rare in the spiritual milieu:

“We always have an ancestral altar at home. And it functions within everything that happens in the family or in the community. That is, we bring the food there that they liked. We interact with them. When they need counselling, we do a seance. So, the ancestors and the way of incorporating them into our lives is the same as when they were alive. It works. But not everywhere. There are very few groups like us”.

In terms of religious affiliation, Samuel’s parents and grandparents were Catholics, although they practiced magic and worshipped ancestors; but apparently, they did not confront these practices with official religion. Like Robert, Samuel considered himself as different from other children. He behaved strangely and had visions; today, these abilities are part of his practice, allowing him to communicate with the Otherworld:

“My mom said that as a kid I once got lost and they found me sitting in the church. And that supposedly I said I was there talking to somebody. Nobody was there. I always had visions or apparitions or revelations of ancestors, spirits, or souls that tell me things. Ever since I was a kid, people would come to me when they had family problems and so on. Or when somebody died, I was the first one in the family to know. Today we have parapsychological courses where we learn different forms of communication with the ancestors. This is my theme, death and dying. I used to accompany the dead or dying people to the other side; a lot of people have passed through my hands, dying people who consciously chose me. I have a lot of experience with this”.

As a child, Samuel attended church with his parents and grandparents. In his teens, he became interested in Christianity, but he soon realised that it did not satisfy him—he was looking for something that transcended Christianity. He read about Wicca in books and on the internet and found out that this teaching is what he was looking for:

“I realised that witchcraft is the foremother of religion. So, I contacted some Wiccans in America. It was very difficult, they didn’t want to take me, because I was still a teenager, but we agreed that there would be some kind of teaching. So, I got some correspondence every month, and it was a kind of a year’s training. And then at seventeen I went to England. With a friend who was a spiritual person. And there I came across the hedge witches—the shamans, the *vedmas*.⁷ And I learned a lot from them. These witches were different, they were Wiccans, but also shamans. All of them had multiple initiations. So, I got such a broad-spectrum teaching of witchcraft. It is the old path”.

Samuel explained his choice of Wicca as his true spiritual path in relation to his childhood:

“It was very easy because there is a lot of similar things—ancestors and nature. Witchcraft is very natural; it is not supernatural at all. I loved that there was that duality, that there were God and Goddess, Mother Earth and Father Sun. Just like in shamanism. For me it was as if I came home”.

Samuel’s experience with learning Wicca is, therefore, different from Robert’s internalisation of core shamanism, as Samuel was learning about magic already in his childhood. For him, Wicca is about work with nature, constant self-education, honouring the ancestors, and preserving the wisdom of the lineage. Tradition is extremely important, and he describes his spiritual development through learning and initiations:

“I underwent a year-long schooling with the Earth Priestess, the Celtic Priestess of Earth. I studied for a year, and I underwent the first initiation. Then another year I studied witchcraft myself and then I was taught by Wiccan priests until I reached the second-stage initiation of high witchcraft. And the third stage was that I created a coven of witches here in the territory of Slovakia, in which we meet and I function as a high priest”.

At present, Samuel is the leader of a group that has a more complex structure and a stronger organisation in comparison with the shamanic circle described above. The core of the Wicca circle is a coven, which is a closed group performing rituals that are not accessible to the public. Samuel compares it with family:

“We are like a close family. We know each other and our families know each other. For example, now my niece is having a wedding and my high priestess and other members of the coven are also going. If someone wants to get in [the coven—the author’s note], it is not easy. For example, now we are recruiting a new member and it took a year to get a feeling for her. And it is going to take another year in deciding whether we are going to accept her or not”.

The coven, therefore, is much better defined than the shamanic inner circle and has clearer boundaries. Another “layer” of the circle consists of people who regularly attend workshops and the school of natural magic, which Samuel established in Bratislava; some of them also participate in spiritual trips to Glastonbury that are organised by Samuel and his circle every year; many of them meet informally as friends. In this group, which is more fluid, Samuel has the position of a teacher and, thus, has an authority to suggest which practices and their interpretations are “proper” or “improper”. Many of these people, however, attend other spiritual meetings and some of them are leaders of smaller circles, combining Wicca teaching with other ideas, such as Slavic neo-paganism or urban shamanism. Thus, in terms of boundaries and membership, this broader Wicca circle is comparable with the FSS inner circle.

And finally, the third “outer layer” consists of people who attend Wicca seminars occasionally, similarly to participants of FSS workshops, as well as those who take part in rituals attached to the Celtic Wheel of the Year. They are performed by Samuel’s circle in the hill woods and are open to the public. People do not have to pay for participation and Samuel highlights this non-commercial aspect, which makes his circle different from other spiritual circles’ activities.

Although, for Samuel, people of all three “layers” are Wiccans, he differentiates the members of the coven and others. He calls people of the second layer “eclectics”, as they can use any tradition. They worship God and Goddesses, but they do not belong to a coven sticking to traditional concepts and rituals. Remarkably, in relation to tradition, Samuel often uses the word “we”. He refers to the community and sees rituals and collective meetings as an instrument of maintaining its solidarity:

“We naturally group these people together. We do a lot of workshops, teachings. I think that the very old methods work. We are big traditionalists, we are not changing those things, but we have reinterpreted them in a way that the people of today understand it”.

It should be also said that collective rituals always take place in a real space. Unlike Robert’s circle, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the coven met regularly and did not transfer their activities to the online space.

Noteworthy, Samuel does not see origins of domestic tradition in Slavic pre-Christian culture, but in Celtic culture. Cyclical rituals of the year are crucial in sustaining this tradition, and Samhain is special in relation to ancestors. Although he spends half a year in England, he always comes back to Slovakia to perform this ritual:

“We have a very strong tradition. We celebrate all the holidays of the Wheel of the Year. Samhain is the beginning of the new year. It hasn’t happened to me in the

last fifteen years that I haven't performed a Wheel of the Year ceremony or a full moon ceremony. We are a strong community. We always try to bring that energy to Slovakia. On Samhain, we always go back home, where we have ancestors, where their bones are. Last Samhain there were over 170 people in the woods".

Samuel does not connect Samhain with Halloween—the latter for him is only about commerce and entertainment. As for Dušičky, he considers it to be a Christian version of Samhain. Unlike Robert, he does not interpret Christian customs and rituals in spiritual terms, but rather stresses the difference between Wicca and Christianity as incompatible religions:

"Christianity took all those ancient customs and holidays and built their stuff on that. We, pagans, we are bringing back those original customs and traditions. Our basic element is Celtic shamanism and ceremonial mysticism. Wicca can be very religious, and there is a lot of occult in our country".

As we can see, stronger boundaries and membership of Wicca circles correspond to better defined doctrine (which is not entirely compatible with other traditions, especially Christianity), as well as a higher value of collective performance. It does not mean, however, that collective rituals diminish emphasis on internal states; their main characteristic in Wicca circles, according to Samuel, is "ceremonial mysticism"—the concentration on inner mental processes and emotions.

As for solitary rituals, Samuel sees them as rather a certain style of living, routine, or quotidian activities. Unlike solitary rituals in core shamanism (which Samuel calls "not so pure"), they are not subject to any principles, although they typically include behaviour aimed at the development of the inner dimension:

"We always have daily personal rituals. They are not prescribed. That is a personal thing. Every day we have meditations, exercises, chores, etc. For me, personal ritual is daily life. I get up in the morning, water flowers, talk to them on the terrace. I eat my food, blessing it beforehand. I get up, I meditate. In the evening I go to bed and give thanks for everything".

Thus, for Samuel, the triduum of All Souls' Day, All Saints' Eve, and All Saints' Day is associated with Samhain as a collective ritual, which significantly differs from Dušičky (its Christian, "contaminated" interpretation), as well as from Halloween (commercial form of entertainment). While "eclectics" are free to celebrate Dušičky or Halloween, the members of the coven are tied by Wicca tradition.

4. Conclusions

The comparison of ritualised behaviour in these two spiritual groups helps us to understand the relative role of collective and solitary rituals in maintaining the solidarity of these communities. First of all, the performance of collective rituals depends on their structure. Both the neo-shamanic group and the Wicca group are divided into the inner circle and outer circles; but the structure of the Wicca group is more complex. In both groups, inner circles are more stable; but the Wicca inner circle is almost unchanging, while the neo-shamanic inner circle is more fluid. In both groups, regular collective rituals are performed in inner circles, but in the Wicca circle, their form is prescribed as a certain tradition, while in the neo-shamanic circle, there is an emphasis on individual choice and the possibility to combine and merge various traditions. Consequently, solitary rituals play different roles—in the neo-shamanic group, they constitute the primary ritual form, which is incorporated into collective rituals; while, in the Wicca circle, they are understood as mundane activities associated with the practitioners' worldview.

Thus, Douglas' hypothesis works if we talk about collective rituals only—the better defined and the more significant the social boundaries, the more important the collective rituals are. It does not work, however, in terms of the inner states—Douglas expects stronger doctrinal emphasis on internal, emotional states with weaker social boundaries and weaker ritualism; but internal states are very important in both circles, although the

degrees of social organisation and collective performance in them differ. I believe that this aspect can be explained by the idea of the social importance of self-spirituality, which is supposed to contribute to the positive transformation of the world. It is also useful to place this idea in the political context. As Jon Bloch notices, in the alternative spiritual network, the “expression of individuality paradoxically becomes a source of solidarity”. He argues that in Western countries, alternative spirituality is “a contemporary social movement, in which protest against social control is voiced more through communication codes than overt political action” (Bloch 1998, p. 286). In Slovakia, such protest can be directed against the dominant religious institutions, which exert more social control than in the West.

Another factor that should be taken into consideration is the political change in the 1990s, which influenced the process of the adoption of spiritual worldviews. As we could see, the spiritual development of both Robert and Samuel was determined by their childhood, although in different ways. For both of them, Christian rituals were part of family activities and both confronted Christianity with their contemporary worldviews. However, Robert interpreted it from the perspective of the common origin and equality of all religions, whilst Samuel put Christianity on the time axis and argued that it transformed and spoiled the original tradition. This difference, again, can be interpreted in terms of social organisation—the Wicca circle with more explicit boundaries is posited as an independent religion, while more fluid shamanic groups presents shamanism as a spiritual path compatible with any religion.

To conclude, Mary Douglas’ ideas about rituals in modern societies proved to be inspirational in the investigation of alternative spiritual circles. In my paper, I paid attention to the rituals associated with the important sphere of human life in any society—communication with the dead. I considered rituals and ritualised behaviour associated with the triduum of All Saints’ Eve, All Saints’ Day, and All Souls’ Day, traditionally called “Dušičky”, which are important in Slovakia, as a Catholic country. I compared them with new phenomena—the celebration of Halloween and Samhain. The results of ethnographic research on spiritual circles operating in Bratislava has shown that these holidays are perceived and practiced differently by people with different religious or spiritual backgrounds. Their interpretation and the degree of associated collective ritualised behaviour depend on the social organisation of a circle to which a practitioner belongs.

Funding: The research leading to the results presented in the paper has received funding from the European Research Council grant agreement No. 101095729 (DEAGENCY). Views and opinions expressed are however those of the author only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Council Executive Agency; neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Committees of the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, and of the European Research Council Executive Agency (ERCEA) (protocol code (2023)3275953-10 May 2023) for studies involving humans.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data is unavailable due to ethical restrictions.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

¹ The global movement of urban shamanism has emerged in the early 1970s (for a review see, for example, Boekhoven 2011; Znamenski 2007). Its institutional and ideological foundations were laid by the American anthropologist Michael Harner and were reflected in his concept of core shamanism defined as the universal principles which are not bound to any specific cultural group or perspective (Harner 1980).

² Core shamanism is only one of the “shamanisms” that are currently spread in Slovakia. There are groups and persons that claim to follow particular shamanic traditions without attending FSS workshops and courses. They have been formed and have functioned on the basis of individual interests, personal contacts and friendships, and their meetings take place in private (Bužeková 2012, 2017, 2020).

- 3 However, there are many internet blogs or Youtube videos about Wicca and witchcraft (see, for example, [De Noir 2019](#)).
- 4 In designating my interlocutors, I used pseudonyms.
- 5 Christian-Democratic politician, Prime Minister of the Slovak Republic from 1991 to 1992.
- 6 Samuel calls his family from father's side "Gypsies", not Roma, which is a politically correct term in the present public discourse in Slovakia, while "Cigán" (Gypsy) is a pejorative term. However, Samuel uses the words "Cigán" and "cigánsky" (Gypsy) rather proudly, referring to the original Slovak name of this ethnic minority. Thus, in my text I used this expression.
- 7 "Vedma" is a Slovak word derived from the word "vedieť" (to know). It means a woman with supernatural abilities and/or skills.

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